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ABSTRACT

An illustration of the dependence and vulnerability of the Third World in relation to the First World--especially North American--news flow is illustrated by the news coverage of the events surrounding Jim Jones and the People's Temple in Guyana. Three editorial attitudes emerged in that coverage: an almost total absence of interest in the country where the tragedy occurred; a seeming determination on the part of the North American media to pursue an editorial policy supportive of accusatory, as distinct from investigatory, reporting; and an almost universal determination on the part of editors to protect the reputations of their reporters. Accusatory reporting followed by editorial censorship aimed at protecting reputations of reporters may be seen in articles that accused the Guyana government of not anticipating the tragedy and of not having full access to Jonestown, that accused the deputy prime minister and the wife of the prime minister of having personally taken possession of one million dollars in cash and jewelry and of taking it to "government headquarters," and that accused the prime minister's wife of being a "strong advocate" of the People's Temple. When corrections and apologies for the factual errors were sought by Guyanese government officials, there were no satisfactory results. (TJ)

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INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF COMMUNICATIONS 1979 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

"Communications and the Issues of Interpendence"

Paper presented by Christopher A. Nascimento

"Conflict or a Free and Open Encounter"

The patterns of communications interdependence which I would like to explore today are the methods and the attitudes which seem to prevail when First World media, especially North American, report on the events in the Third World. We know that the North American and Western European media virtually dominate, if not control, news flow in the existing international communications environment. In these circumstances, it would be more accurate to state that, as a rule, developing nations are rather more dependent than interdependent, certainly, they have become vulnerable.

The vulnerability, however, extends to the people of the First World, in that, they are becoming increasingly isolated from the realities of the Third World by being denied access to relevant and pertinant information by their own media monopoly of and approach to news flow.

It is years now since the nations of the Third World have advanced the proposition that both the world's economic and information order discriminates, in institutional, financial and political terms against any possibility of the developing nations advancing their economics beyond the position of almost eternal poverty. Little, however, has happened to change the situation.

My own country, Guyana is one of those poor nations. We are reasonably typical. We carry an increasing debt burden, we do not produce oil, our foreign exchange reserves are shrinking, we have extensive but untapped resources but we need access to selectively relevant technology, we are desperately short of development capital and we are attempting to emerge from a past of colonial domination and exploitation.

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Few of us here today, if any of us, are unaware of the media coverage given to Guyana when the madness of Jim Jones was unleashed in one small part of my country. The disaster was covered in the First World, especially North America, with an intensity probably greater than any other world event in contemporary history outside of war.

In the course of that coverage, three (3) editorial attitudes emerged and they provide I believe a unique opportunity for examining the communications environment in which the Third World has to function.

First, an analysis of the reporting of the New York Times, the Washington Post and Time Magazine, to say nothing of the television networks, reveals an almost total absence of interest in the country where the tragedy took place, except an occasional superficial and usually snide reference to current social and political conditions.

The fact that Guyana's decision to welcome the People's Temple as one of a number of pioneer, migratory, agricultural settlements in the hinterland, reflected the struggle being waged for economic survival was ignored. The focus was on the disaster, understandably, but never on the fundamental reasons for it in terms of the nation where it occurred.

Guyana's colonial heritage, like all of the rest of the newly independent Commonwealth Caribbean territories had left it with a fragile, narrow, economic base, dependent, to a very large extent, for its foreign exchange earnings on sugar. Its bauxite industry, like that of Jamaica's, had been bequeathed by the British to Canadian and American interests.

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Guyana, like the rest of the Caribbean, apart from oil producing Trinidad and Tobago, was engulfed in the energy crisis.

All of these facts were pertinent. They helped explain the need for countries like Guyana to expand and diversify their economies by seeking to populate and develop, for agricultural purposes, new lands with what appeared to be a group of economically disanfranchised Americans with willing and productive hands.

Instead, we had the New York Times repo-ters, Nordheimer and Treaster reporting on one occasion that the Guyanese people spoke "pigeon English" and on another occasion, "patois", neither of which is true, and that we were highly illiterate, when in fact we have a literacy rate higher than 85%.

But, much worse than all of that, was the seeming determination on the part of the North American media to pursue an editorial policy supportive of accusatory, as distinct from investigatory, reporting. Somehow, somewhere, someone had to be blamed and the most convenient of sinners is the Government.

When the Government targetted for this kind of reporting happens to be in a small developing nation, the experience of Jonestown, leaves no doubt in my mind that the right of redress becomes virtually non-existant, no matter that sensationalism, factual error, speculation and distortion pervades the reporting.

Which brings me to the third editorial attitude which emerged, and, that is, an almost universal determination on the part of the editors to protect the reputation of their reporters rather than expose their readers to the other side. I personally found this to be the case with the editors of the New York Times, Time Magazine and the Washington Post.

The worst example of accusatory reporting, followed by deliberate editorial censorship aimed at protecting reputations of the reporters, was an article published by the New York Times on December 24, 1978. That article accused the Guyana Government of turning "a blind eye" and "a deaf ear" to warnings that Jonestown was "a crowded armed camp....out of control." It was written by one of the Times senior reporters normally based in Washington, Nicholos Horrock.

The article sought to establish that, either the Guyana Government should have anticipated the tragedy or were to be blamed for it by allowing the People's Temple to settle in Guyana.

The article came to this judgement on the basis of, it said, "interviews and documents", but these sources of information, throughout the article, remained unidentifiable.

Guyana was faced with the very real possibility of its image being very seriously if not irrevocably tarnished, in the eyes of people in most of the rest of the world by one of the worlds most powerful and prestigious newspapers.

An examination of the article establishes that at least eight (8) accusations made were factual errors, all of which could have been checked for verification with independent sources.

One example: "Two senior United States officials", not named. were quoted as questioning the truth of Guyana's Ambassador in the U.S.A. having made enquiries through the District Attorney's office in San Francisco as to whether there was any evidence that the People's Temple had committed any crimes in that city. A simple phone call to the District Attorney's office would have established that our Ambassador had pursued such an enquiry, not once, but twice. The State Department denied that U.S. officials had made such a statement.

Another example: Guyanese Government officials were reported as not having full access to Jonestown. The Times' reporters knew that a visitors book had been kept at Jonestown, reference to which would have made nonsense of the accusation. Not once, was this question raised with any Government official who could have established its inaccuracy.

I visited the Deputy National News Editor of the New York Times, Bill Kovach, after publication and was interviewed by him and one of his reporters for over an hour. I refuted the accusations and stressed that the New York Times had failed to, but could still check, for independent verification. Where our differences where judgemental, I argued that the reader ought to have the other side of the story.

The Times did not publish my interviews and did not correct their errors.

Subsequently Mr. Kovach admitted, in correspondence with a representative of our Government, that errors of fact did occur.

Further complaints from my Government illicited the suggestion that we write a letter to the editor. I already, at that time, had a number of letters on file sent to me by Guyanese living in New York who had written protesting the article, but none had been published. In any event, a letter to the editor simply does not enjoy comparable exposure or credibility with a front page news story.

It was then suggested that I write an "op-sd page" piece identifying the nature but not the specifics of my complaint. I wrote the piece. I revised it three times. Finally, it was rejected by the "op-sd page" editor on the grounds that the arguments presented "are familiar" and "we have published them several times."

I wrote to the publisher, Arthur Sulzberger. He replied apologising, but said that "a clear separation" was preserved "between the news department and the editorial" and the editors "were unaware of each others deeds and experiences." He said that the Times "would still be prepared to consider a "Letter to the Editor", that is, eight (8) months after the offending article was published".

As it happens, Mr. Kovach, of News, actually received my "op-sd page" piece and personally passed it to Editorial with, he said a strong argument in favour of its publication; so, Mr. Sulzberger, it appears, was misinformed.

In any event, what value the claim for separation between news and opinion when the original news article set out to make judgements.

I am satisfied that, had the interview with me been published, it would have brought into question the credibility of one of the Times' leading reporters. My conclusion: the editors of the Times exercised deliberate editorial censorship to protect their reporter at the expense of the truth being published and to the cost of the Government of Guyana.

The Washington Post, also on December 24, 1978, published a story on Jonestown in which it accused the wife of the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister of having personally taken possession of $1M in cash and jewellery found at Jonestown and having taken it to "Government Headquarters." Few people, the Post article observed "know where the money and valuables are now." The story was written by Charles Krause, author of one of the instant books.

In fact, the Deputy Prime Minister and the Prime Minister's wife had travelled on the same plane with police officers escorting the money which was taken to police headquarters and then taken to the Bank of Guyana.

The Post refused, at first, to correct the story. Once more, I became personally involved. I suggested to the Post editors that had a similar story been written about the wife of the U.S. President and found to be inaccurate they would have both corrected it and apologised for it.

Finally, after intervention at the level of the Post's publisher by an influential American, the Post agreed to send Krause back to Guyana to interview me. I provided Krause with all the evidence he required from the police and the Bank officials. On January 23, 1979, the Post published accurately the Krause interview with me, but nowhere did Krause admit that he had been wrong and certainly there was no apology.

Again, I offer the view that the Post editors were more concerned with covering for their reporter than getting at the truth. Again, redress was very nearly impossible and, when it came, it was inadequate.

Time Magazine, on December 11, 1978, published a story accusing the Prime Minister's wife of being a "strong advocate" of the People's Temple. Mrs. Burnham wrote a letter to Time pointing out that she had never met Jim Jones and had only met other members of the Temple on a few public occasions and that was her only knowledge of them until the tragedy.

Time first agreed to publish the letter, but after receiving it, suggested that they publish it only in their international edition, though the story was carried in all of their editions. Then, finally, they declined to publish it at all, on the grounds that their reporter's sources were reliable.

Again I wonder, if Time had made such an accusation about Mrs. Carter, would they have refused to publish a letter of correction from her?

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Guyana was subjected to this kind of editorial approach in an environment where the world media representatives functioned freely, were provided with every possible facility, often at considerable expense and by a tiny nation unused to coping with such massive attention. In the course of all this coverage, reporters from the three (3) publications I have mentioned had access at various times to the Prime Minister and other senior Cabinet Ministers.

It is possible to document similar cases in respect to a host of other North American and British journals who covered Jonestown, but I have chosen for convenience three (3) of the most prestigious in the United States of America, where freedom of expression and of the press is supposed to be beyond challenge.

A respected and much admired friend of mine and former Trustee of the IIC, Elmer Lower, once wrote that a free press must afford reasonable opportunity "for reply to those who disagree with their editorialising and to those whom they chastise." Or, is it that double standards prevail, and that there is one standard of freedom of expression observed for North America and the United Kingdom and another for those "lesser bread of mortals beyond the law," in the Third World.

Elmer Lower echos Milton's plea for a "Free and Open Encounter." It is precisely the plea being made today by the developing nations of the world in their encounter with a mass media monopoly exercised and controlled by the developed nations.

The problem is, as Sean MacBride stressed at Dubrovnick, on this forum last year, that the world relies on the mass media when making a judgement, and the judgements by the people of the First World about the people of the Third World are made on information received through a First World dominated media.